With You

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With You

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Summary

Sequel to Mark. When Will and Hannibal discover they are soulmates, they must learn how to navigate the path to forming a long term relationship, which would be a lot easier if Jack hadn't called Will in to deal with a serial killer. Some Wilana, but not a lot.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

When Will was born he was one of the rare cases, one born without a mark, or even an egg. He never had any reason to believe he would ever have a soulmate, but the reality that others did was everywhere. It was… hard, at first, coming to terms with the idea that he would always be alone, but he did and the dogs he saved helped fill the aching void. He wasn't okay, but he was better… getting better and then he was told he had to see a psychiatrist.

Okay, so she never used those terms, but the idea behind it was very heavily implied. Apparently people who don't even have the potential for a soulmate commonly become anti-social and depressed… and okay, he didn't go out of his way to talk to people and he wasn't the happiest of people, but then he had seen into the minds of killers, so how exactly was anyone supposed to be after that? So really, he had just gotten himself sorted and then life had to throw him a curveball and now he had a soulmate.

He,

Will Graham,

Had a ***soulmate***.

At first he was just stunned. He had someone who belonged to him, with him and he didn't have to be alone anymore. Not that he was alone before that, he did have his dogs, but no matter how much he loved them, it couldn't compare to another human.

It was then reality slapped him. It slapped him and then kicked him down the stairs so fast that he barely managed to keep his feet under him. He wasn't stable. He thought he was, but Jesus… he needed at least five feet of space between him and his soulmate. Sure they had just met, but Hannibal couldn't be okay with this. How could he be okay with being tied to someone who can't handle being touched? Then there was the issue with housing and… oh my God, he was not thinking housing already, they had only just met, but Will had dogs. A lot of dogs. Six of them and they were all very lovely and he wouldn't trade them for the world, but what if Hannibal didn't like them? What if he just hated dogs? Even worse, he could be allergic to them.

Will had been to Hannibal's home and it was spotless. It wasn't the type of home that could ever be animal-friendly. In fact, the thought of proper, respectable Hannibal throwing a dinner party while dogs wandered in and out of the room had Will laughing hysterically; until he realised that he didn't fit into the picture either. It had been hard enough just to think of the man as a possible psychiatrist, let alone something as intimate as a soulmate and a potential lover. Hannibal didn't seem like he would reject him, though, and that was something. It wasn't common, but it did happen. In fact, the play Romano Juliano was based on that exact idea and looked at soulmates through the lens of differing social circles and political ideology.

Was a mark on your skin really enough to tie you to a person forever?

The skin where he knew his mark to be still itched and he knew he had achieved nothing by running away, possibly even made the situation worse. Hannibal was probably regretting ever

meeting him after that little display, and to think, it had all come about because Alana thought he needed therapy.

Alana…

...Oh God.

How was he meant to tell Alana that he couldn't have Hannibal as a psychiatrist, because she had just set him up with his soulmate? There had to be some sort of regulation preventing people from doing that, didn't there? And now his head hurt and he wished that insistent buzzing would just go away. Even though he hadn't eaten any of the main course Hannibal had provided, he wasn't hungry. In fact, all he wanted was to go to sleep, but that was unlikely to happen that night and now his phone... *His phone*.

Getting up out of bed, he searched through his pockets for his phone. When the backlight finally came on, he saw that he had received three new texts from an unknown number. He didn't even need to open the first one to see who they were from, but he still hesitated before doing so.

Dear Will, Alana gave me your number in case I needed to contact you and I realised you did not have my own. I apologise for this oversight and I look forward to meeting you. Hannibal Lecter

My Dearest Will, I hate the idea of you being alone so soon after we have finally been united, however, I did not believe that you would have appreciated me following, nor a phone call. I only hope that you do not regret our meeting, nor believe that I feel the same. Hannibal

It frustrated Will that Hannibal was able to see through him so easily, though it could hardly have been a stretch.

I am yours, as you are mine, even if they rend the skin from my bones, they will find your mark there.

It was a translated quote from the play, Romano Juliano; one of its most famous for its romance and tragedy; and there was rarely a person who mentioned the quote and said it hadn't made them cry during one viewing or another. Soulmates had always seemed like someone else's life, but now he had someone who was quoting him Romano Juliano over text.

If his eyes had teared up a little as he stared, that would just be something kept between him and the dogs. He was, however, able to fall asleep soon after.

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The next day, Will found him even less patient with his students than usual. It wasn't their fault; he just had a tendency towards rudeness when he was afraid. Every few minutes he would find himself glancing towards the entrance, as though expecting Alana to just appear. He had no idea what he was going to tell her when he did. Something along the lines of, *'you know the problem I had, well it turns out Hannibal is my soulmate'*. It wasn't so much that he was afraid of that part exactly, it was more the fact that was worried that, since Hannibal was clearly ruled out, Alana was going to persist with her belief that he needed a psychiatrist. It was only when he was half-way through lunch that he finally remembered that Alana wasn't going to be at the academy that day.

He had started to relax after that, but he should have then realised that he wasn't going to get off that easily, though it wasn't Alana's silhouette that cut through the bright light of the hallway. Will didn't notice until the end of the lecture he was giving, and it was for this reason that he felt entirely justified in his start of surprise when he finally noticed Hannibal in the doorway. Will had no idea how long he had been standing there, though, it had probably been a while, even if Hannibal’s perfect posture gave nothing away. Noticing Will’s stare, Hannibal's head tilted to the side as he returned the look, both in acknowledgement and curiosity.

It was then that Will had realised that he had stopped talking. Desperately, he tried to recall what he had been saying before his interruption, but the damage had been done. Students, now overcome with curiosity as to what had occurred, as well as picking up on his own inattention, were finding it difficult to concentrate on the lecture he was giving. It was only fortunate that it was so close to the end, so no one protested when he cut it a bit short... or at least, none of his students did. As they filed out of the room, most giving Hannibal quizzical looks as they passed. Luckily, none of them said anything and Hannibal proceeded, unobstructed, to the front of the room.

'Hello Will,' said Hannibal, his tone polite, but warm and he looked as though he were genuinely happy to see him. That was going to take some getting used to.

'Hello Doctor Lecter,' said Will, turning his back slightly to organise his notes and shut down the PowerPoint presentation still left on the screen. He had a feeling that a picture of a three-day-old corpse was probably not an appropriate backdrop for their conversation.

'Hannibal, please. I believe we can dispense of such formalities after last night,' Hannibal said with a slight smile. He didn't wait for a reply, or maybe he just knew that Will didn't have one other than a small nod. 'I must confess, I am not sure where I wish to begin. I expected that I would first have to begin with an apology, but after witnessing your talk, I believe I must inform you of my disappointment that you were required to conclude so soon. I found it quite enlightening.'

'Surely I didn't say anything that you weren't already aware of,' Will said, trying to brush off the comment as he usually did.

'You have a beautiful mind, Will, there is no need for you to be ashamed of it,' Hannibal said and Will gave a dry laugh.

'Trust me, my mind is many things, but beautiful is not one of them,' Will said, looking up, his gaze carefully obstructed by his glasses.

'And why is that? You are capable of understanding the core nature of individual human beings; their hopes, their fears, their desires; as clearly as though they were your own. I believe many faiths would go so far as to call it a gift,' Hannibal said, continuing before Will could interject. 'That would of course be a rather crude understanding of it, though not entirely an inaccurate one.'

'I believe you said you would have to apologise for something?' Will said cautiously, not wanting to continue along that line of discussion.

'Ah, yes,' Hannibal said, sounding slightly embarrassed. 'I am afraid I have let my emotions get the better of me. I knew you desired space after what had transpired last night, but after you left I was able to think of little else. I knew I would have to see you again if only to confirm your reality.'

'Well, here I am,' Will said and Hannibal nodded.

'Yes, here you are,' Hannibal said and the admiration in his voice caused Will to flush. 'And though my main objective is now complete, it has prompted me to make one request of you, though you may find it impertinent of me to ask.' Hannibal paused. 'Due to circumstances, we were unable to complete our meal and my request of you is that we might be able to make another attempt?'

'I suppose that sounds reasonable,' Will said slowly, unable to hide his thrill of excitement and fear the request inspired.

'Excellent. I have kept aside the wine you brought and I have just the dessert that shall suit it perfectly,' Hannibal said, before a hint of mischief appeared on his face, 'I hope you have no reservation about discussing work, since there is a number of matters I would wish to discuss with you.'

'Work is fine. It would probably be either that or my dogs anyway,' Will said dryly. 'Do you have a preferred day, or...?'

'How about two nights from tonight? I am afraid I will be quite busy for the rest of the evening and so will be unable to spare the time to buy the necessary ingredients.'

'You don't need to go out of your way to impress me. I am far from impressive myself, so don't go to too much trouble,' Will said, not use to the kind of attention Hannibal was giving him.

'On the contrary, I feel a great need to impress you,' Hannibal said smoothly. 'However, it is not purely for your benefit, as I quite enjoy the art of cooking and take every opportunity to relish it when I am able.'

'Well, okay then. As long as it is not purely for my benefit,' Will said, laughing a little.

'Then, before I depart, I take it you have not yet informed Alana as to what has occurred?' Hannibal said, and Will swallowed.

'Not yet, however, that is mostly due to her being elsewhere today and the fact that it is not really a topic to discuss over the phone,' Will said, knowing his excuse was a flimsy one.

'I see.'

'I expect I will be seeing Alana at some point tomorrow, where we can discuss the matter,' Will said, not entirely satisfied with his response.

'Well then, Will, I shall bid you good day and I shall see you on Wednesday,' Hannibal said.

Not knowing what else to say, Will said, 'I look forward to it.'

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That night Will poured himself two fingers of whiskey and settled down amongst his dogs to read. Or that was the plan. Instead, he found himself distracted by the conversation with Hannibal he had earlier, replaying each moment and kicking himself whenever he thought of something he should have said, or should have explained better. The fate of his mother, for instance, while not something he was looking forward to disclosing, was probably something that Hannibal should be aware of. It seemed like some sort of cosmic joke that he was given a soulmate when his lack of a mark was what had killed her.

He didn't deserve it.

But Hannibal... He seemed so genuinely happy. How was Will ever supposed to tell him any of this?

Fortunately, his dogs seemed determined to draw him out of the mood he had fallen into and soon he was rolling around on the floor with them. Except for Wiley that is, but Will would probably find him under his bed later since it was Wiley's safe spot. Wilma, Waldor, Wyatt, Wanda and Watson more than made up for Wiley's lack and after half-an-hour Will was absolutely spent. It didn't stop him from playing around for another fifteen minutes, even though he knew that it would be harder to calm them down later and that he would have to fight them off his bed. It wouldn't bother him so much if it wasn't for the fact that Waldor liked to lie next to Will's face and being a dog, he didn't have the best breath. Wiley was the only one who was any good at have his teeth cleaned and he preferred the underside of the bed or sleeping half underneath Wilma.

The next morning Will woke feeling surprisingly well rested, though, that had nothing to do with his dogs, who had decided to migrate to his bed during the night. Wilma was lying across his legs, Watson on his left side Wyatt at his feet and Waldor was, of course, in his face. With a groan, he pushed Waldor aside with the ease of familiarity and wandered out to

the kitchen to make coffee. It took him until he reached the shower before thoughts of Hannibal struck him and he wondered absently at what it would have been like to wake up to Hannibal instead.

Did he drink tea or coffee in the mornings?

Will thought coffee, but then Will never was much of a tea drinker. It would probably the really good coffee too, freshly ground and the kind of roast that would make it seem almost sacrilegious to add anything, but hot water to. Will, on the other hand, was quite happy with the instant coffee he bought at half price whenever it was on sale. Thoughts of Hannibal shifted soon after to thoughts of Alana, causing him to stub his toes on the way out of the shower. He still had no idea what to tell her, though he sent her a message asking if she would like to meet up during her lunch break.

It was a mistake.

Will spent the rest of the morning hovering near his phone. He was half hoping she already had plans, though, knowing that putting it off wouldn't achieve anything. It took until he was halfway out the door, already five minutes later than he intended to be before he received a reply.

I was planning on cornering you in your office, but I suppose this works too. Should I be worried?

To be honest, Will wasn't quite sure how to answer that question. The matter had gotten so much larger than whether or not Hannibal would make a good psychiatrist, that it made the question difficult to answer without saying everything.

Let's just say, we had an interesting evening.

Will sent the message before he had a chance to over think it. He tended to do that and he knew that if he didn't send it straight away he never would, as he would be too caught up in the exact wording he wanted to use.

That bad, huh?

Alana's comment gave Will pause.

Bad?

Finding out you had a soulmate shouldn't be bad?

Was it... *bad?*

Sure Hannibal got the bad side of the deal, but any person in Will's position would love to have this news.

It was just… soulmates came with the necessity to be social and Will had never been so good at that. There was a reason he preferred dogs to people. Dogs weren't complicated. They

didn't care what you looked like or how smart you were or how much money you earned. They just wanted you to love and take care of them.

But what would Hannibal expect of him and what did he expect in return?

It took Will five minutes to realise he had yet to reply to Alana.

Unexpected would be the word I would use.

I look forward to hearing about it then.

Will sighed and put down his phone. Just over two hours to go.

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Alana was five minutes late.

Sure that was to be expected and it was possibly even a little unrealistic not to expect her to be a little bit late, but Will was beginning to feel impatient and his nerves were high strung. The worst part was that he didn't want to admit to what he was so afraid of Alana saying, because it would...

A knock sounded from the doorway and Alana stood there this time, her arms holding a small amount of papers that she must have taken from her office to read over at home. She was wearing red again today; it always looked lovely on her, as it brought out the creamy colour of her skin and the darkness of her hair. It also made him very aware of a fact he hadn't realised before, that this would be the first time they would be in a room alone together.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' Alana said and Will waved it off, with an attempt at nonchalance.

'You're fine. Come in and have a seat,' Will said, adjusting his seat and his glasses as Alana sat down. 'Thank you for coming.'

'So you wanted to talk about your meeting with Hannibal?' Alana said, her hand coming to rest on her knee as she looked at him attentively. 'I should apologise again for leaving you in that situation. I should have called, but I was barely able to get out that text message as it was.

'I know,' Will said and took a deep breath, a hand coming up to rub at his eyes beneath his glasses. 'Look, I don't really know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it and we can work out the details after.' Will could feel Alana's eyes on him sharpen and he was starting to remember why he hated psychiatrists. 'Hannibal Lecter is one of my soulmates. I grew a mark.'

'Will, how did you...?'

'I don't know, proximity maybe? All I know is that we were talking and then I could feel a burning itch down the back of my neck. Hannibal looked and saw what it was. He must have formed some sort of hunch then as he went to check his own,' Will said in a rush to get all the words out.

'Will, did you see your mark and Hannibal's?' Alana said and Will tried to block out her emotions, it wouldn't help either of them. Instead he simply nodded. 'I see, but I don't know what you want me to say. Do you want to ask me about Hannibal?'

'Wouldn't that be cheating?' Will said, only half in jest.

'I doubt that matters when it comes to soulmates. You already know they will play a massive role in your life; so it is only reasonable that you would want to hear the opinion of a mutual acquaintance,' Alana said before pausing to choose her words carefully. 'And in your case, with the way you are, and the way he is... Be careful, okay?'

Will nodded, taking her words into consideration. 'Hannibal has invited me over for dinner tomorrow night and I said I will go.'

'Well, cooking is something that Hannibal does well,' Alana said and Will noticed for the first time, that Alana wasn't really looking at him either.

'So I gathered from what I saw when I was there Sunday night,' Will said.

'Right.'

'I didn't really eat anything; I left after the first course,' Will said. 'It looked great though.'

For a long while there was silence, neither really knowing what else to say and Alana left soon after. When the door closed, Will put his head in his hands. There was a loss there, undefinable and purely potential only, but...

She hadn't said it.

It was only after Alana had left that Will finally admitted to himself what he had been scared that she would say. She didn't say she was happy for them.

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Will wasn't able to sleep that night and the day that followed was just the minutes that would bring Will face to face with his soulmate again. Soon there wasn't even that. It had taken Will half-an-hour to decide between two, almost identical plaid shirts and brown pants, before giving in and grabbing the one closest to his hand. He could hardly keep up even this

standard for very long, so Hannibal would just have to get used to Will's lower dress standards.

Knocking on the door to Hannibal's house, Will didn't even have a wine bottle to keep his hands occupied, but he did not have to wait long. Hannibal, as ever, was impeccably groomed and dressed, though not in a three piece suit, as Will had expected. Instead, he seemed to be wearing a form of Japanese robe. The outer layer was navy, which was strengthened by the black inner layer.

'Good evening Will, please come in,' Hannibal said, stepping aside. Will could hear the smile in Hannibal's voice, though he was more occupied with Hannibal's sock clad feet.

'I take it we will be having Japanese tonight,' Will said, following Hannibal inside and barely stifling the urge to remove his own shoes.

'Yes. At the last minute I decided that a slightly less formal dinner would be more appropriate for this,' Hannibal said, before adding, 'do you not agree?'

Will didn't answer since he wasn't sure how Japanese cuisine could be any less formal than the last meal Hannibal had served. Instead of leading Will into the dining room, however, Hannibal led Will off to a side room.

'I would ask you to remove your shoes and to wear these slippers as the tatami mats are rather delicate,' Hannibal said, opening a drawer just outside the room and handed Will a pair of fresh slippers, like the ones Will had seen in hotels and still wrapped in their plastic.

'Fine,' Will said, taking the slippers and sitting down to remove his shoes and replace them. Meanwhile Hannibal opened the sliding door and stepped inside. Even from here, Will could tell the room wasn't very brightly lit and he found himself hurrying a little to see what was inside.

It wasn't a very large room, but serviceable and the walls were lined with various blades, scrolls and Samurai armaments. At the far end of the room was a small shine, one that Will could tell was carefully maintained and a sticks of incense were releasing small streams of smoke into the air. In the centre of the room, Hannibal knelt on a cushion next to a small table, tending to a pot of water that rested on a hot plate. To the side were two plates of food. One was a plate of thinly sliced meat and the other was piled with a variety of foods, including vegetables, tofu, noodles, mushrooms and onions, with a long pair of chopsticks lying across each plate. Moving closer, Will could see two serving plates, a smaller pair of chopsticks on rests, a few bowls of sauce, with a few smaller ones filled with a variety of things and a rolled up white towels on plate.

Sitting down across from Hannibal, cross-legged Will said, 'so what is all this?'

'This is shabu shabu,' Hannibal said, covering the water now and taking a small, cloudy glass bottle and pouring the clear liquid into one of the small glass cups. 'And this is sake. Be careful not to drink it too fast, it can be quite strong.'

'I take it there is more to it than simply boiling the food,' Will said and Hannibal nodded.

'Very good, William. In the Japanese culture, people serve each other their drinks, rather than themselves, so if you would please,' Hannibal said and Will took the small bottle and poured the second cupful. 'As you perceived earlier, there is more to shabu shabu than simply boiling the food. The name, in fact, originates from the sound you make when cooking the meat, but we will get to that momentarily. First, use the towel to clean your hands, though keep in mind, it is quite warm.'

Will picked up the towel as directed and proceeded to wipe his hands. As Hannibal had said, it was quite warm, though he found that he rather liked the sensation. Once the towel had become relatively cool, Will followed Hannibal's example and folded up the towel and placed it back on the thin plate.

'To continue, the meat used for shabu shabu is very thin, so it does not take very long to cook. Once that it done, you may choose to dip it in one of the two provided sauces, the dark one is soy and the tan is sesame. To the side you can see some chilli oil, garlic, spring onions and ginger, which you may add as you see fit,' Hannibal said, taking up some of his own flavourings and stirring them into the sauce with his chopsticks. 'You will find that the chilli oil and the ginger go best with the sesame sauce and the garlic and chives pair best with the soy.'

'You said about the meat; what about the stuff on this plate?' Will said, gesturing to a plate of mushrooms, tofu, noodles and vegetables and wondering just how he was meant to handle all of this. He had never actually experienced Japanese food before and now he felt like he was thrown a bit in the deep end.

'They may be just placed into the water to cook, and removed as desired,' Hannibal said, lifting the lid and taking a pair of long chopsticks. Carefully, he picked up a slice of the meat and swished it through the boiling water, the meat quickly becoming shrivelled and turning a pale brown. Lifting the cooked meat from out of the water, Hannibal said, 'can you pick up your plate for me, William?'

Doing as he was bid, Hannibal placed the meat on the plate and Will lowered it back to the table. Hannibal then proceeded to cook a piece of meat and place it on his own plate. Picking up the second pair of long chopsticks, Hannibal placed some vegetables, mushrooms and tofu into the pot. Will watched carefully, trying to work out how to position the chopsticks in his hand so as to not make a complete fool of himself or worse, have to ask for a fork.

Hannibal picked up on Will's problem easily, however and said, 'I take it you have not used chopsticks before.'

'Guilty,' Will said frowning, he had been so close to getting the hang of it. Standing with a grace that Will tried to ignore, Hannibal moved over to kneel beside Will, taking his hand gently in his own. With a light, but firm touch, Hannibal moulded Will's fingers around the chopsticks, murmuring quiet instructions, before guiding Will's hand down to the plate to pick up the meat. Hannibal removed his hand then, allowing Will to choose which sauce he wished to use.

Will chose the sesame one, trying hard not to let his hand slip as he lifted it up to his mouth. He could feel Hannibal's eyes on him as he pushed the meat into his mouth, released it with

his chopsticks and withdrew them so he could close his mouth completely as he chewed. It was a pleasant taste, though not a strong one and it added a relatively creamy texture to the meat. He may have just chosen the one he will stick to for the rest of the meal.

His mouth finally clear, Will said, 'So why Japanese food? I'm sure there could have been others that you could have chosen that would have taken less trouble.' It took a moment for Hannibal to answer and Will realised that Hannibal had returned to his former position and started eating.

'My family died when I was rather young and I lived in an orphanage until I was sixteen, when my uncle Robertus took me in,' Hannibal said, his voice distant. Will could tell there were absences in the story, but didn't push. 'My uncle is a very good man, but he is a very busy one, leaving town frequently and leaving most of my care to his wife, Lady Murasaki. I continued to stay with them during my initial training to become a surgeon; however, we parted on bad terms and I have not seen, nor heard from her since then.'

'I take it that you learned a great deal from her,' Will said, contemplating retrieving a piece of cabbage from the water against the difficulty involved in actually retrieving it.

'Yes, I did, and I still learn,' Hannibal said, picking up his sake glass. 'But enough about that. If you would William.' Hannibal indicated Will pick up his own cup. 'To us; fortune has never been so good to me as now that it has brought me to you.'

Will flushed, feeling as though he should probably say something, but not really knowing what he should say. Instead, he met Hannibal's glass with his own and repeated Hannibal when he said, 'kanpai', before taking a sip of sake.

'Please let me know if you require any assistance with retrieving any of the food,' Hannibal said, retrieving a small cluster of thin, white mushrooms and placing them on his plate and returning the chopsticks to the plate.

'Thanks, but I think I should be fine,' Will said, picking up the chopsticks. Unfortunately he found it was hard enough trying to remember how to position his fingers, but the extra length of the chopsticks also threw off the balance and he fumbled at them awkwardly for a while before he was able to take anything out. Following Hannibal's example, he returned the long chopsticks to the food plate and picked up the smaller pair, dipping the cabbage into the sauce and putting it into his mouth. He felt like a complete mess, as the sauce flicked off his food, which was only worsened by the return of Hannibal's gaze.

'I must ask, Will, I am curious about your reaction to gaining a mark. You seemed rather pleased when you first found out about it, yet now I see something is weighing on you,' Hannibal said gently. Will bit back a dark laugh, he had been wondering how he was going to bring this up, but since Hannibal had provided an opening.

'As I said when we first met, I was raised by my father,' said Will, trying to keep his voice steady, his eyes firmly on the plate in front of him. 'My mother, she didn't take my birth very well and suffered from post-partum depression. It didn't help matters that I was born premature and without a mark. My mother was convinced that if I had been born at the right

time then I would have been born with a mark. She hated herself for that. She thought she had failed as a mother... She didn't make it to my first birthday.'

'I would tell you not to blame yourself, however, I know that just hearing those words will not stop the whispers of your mind,' Hannibal said, eating far more gracefully than Will could have ever managed. 'I do suspect that there is more to this story than what you have told me and it is my understanding that it is something that you probably do not even admit to yourself.'

Will swallowed harshly and nodded. He had expected the previous question, but he... Hannibal was right in the fact that he barely even admitted it to himself. It was the type of thing that kept him up at night when he first found out and caused nightmares for a long time after. The truth of the matter was one which he should have never known at all, but after finding out the manner in which his mother died, some private research and his own in-depth knowledge of his father's character; it enabled him to discover the secret that had haunted his father until his own death, not long after Will's thirtieth birthday. Will never told his father of his suspicions, he wasn't sure he could handle to hear it confirmed.

'I apologise, that was impolite of me to ask such a question during dinner,' Hannibal said, his sincerity coloured by regret. Will didn't respond, just listened. 'There are things that have happened in my past that I do not feel up to speaking of yet either and I should not be pressuring to reveal such sensitive information.'

'That's fine,' Will said, his voice shaky and he attempted to distract himself with getting some more food, though he had lost a lot of his appetite. 'So, you wanted to talk to me about the lecture you listened in on?'

'Indeed I did, William,' Hannibal said, a small smile forming. 'You see, I was curious about...'

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After dinner, Hannibal served a cup of green tea. Will had tried green tea once, by accident, and didn't quite like it, but sitting here with Hannibal and just taking small sips, it was rather soothing. Once on a mutually agreeable topic, Will found Hannibal to be an extremely intelligent and engaging conversationalist, but he also displayed a rather wicked sense of humour once relaxed. His views on psychoanalysis, in regards to extremely violent criminals were groundbreaking and Will had to request for Hannibal to write out the names of some of his references, so that Will could look them up in his own time. Hannibal would have nothing of it and invited Will to use his library as often as he would like.

'So,' Will said, considering the offer, 'what is your opinion about dogs?'

'Dogs?' Hannibal said, surprised, not expecting the sudden subject change. 'I consider them to be very loyal and intelligent creatures.'

'Yes, they are that,' Will said with a laugh. 'They are also rather dirty, smelly, time-consuming and I currently have six of them.'

'Six?' Hannibal said with an understandable amount of surprise.

'I have a bad habit of taking in strays,' Will said, wanting to know what Hannibal's stance was. It wasn't going to change anything and he would bring Hannibal around if he had to. 'Originally I would try and adopt them out, but then I found Wiley and he got rather attached to Wilma. He also exhibited signs of being abused by his former owners. I couldn't give him away after that.'

'I suppose, as far as coping methods go, I have seen worse,' Hannibal said, before giving a small grin. 'So, Wilma and Wiley, what are the names of the others?'

'Wanda, Waldor, Wyatt and Watson,' Will said, returning the smile. 'I like the challenge of choosing names beginning with "w".'

'Do you think you will take in any other dogs?' Hannibal said and Will thought about it. If it was just him and the situation came up, then he would likely do it, but now he had Hannibal to consider.

'I don't know. Before, yes, but now...' Will said, crossing his arms across his chest.

'Because of me?' Hannibal said carefully and Will hesitated before nodding. 'I see. Please, do not take me into account. One of the biggest pitfalls people fall into when they meet their soulmate is they move too fast and try and share things before they are ready. There is a misconception that a soulmate should know everything about each other. We have only met twice now and we have the rest of our lives to work everything out.'

'I should probably leave now,' Will said, looking at his watch. It was much later than he thought it would be, especially after how soon he left the last time. 'I have to drive home and then I have a lecture tomorrow.'

'Will...' Hannibal said, surprised, leaning towards him before he collected himself. 'Would I be imposing if I sit in on one of your lectures again? Unfortunately it cannot be tomorrow as I will be busy with patients until late afternoon.'

'Well, that should give me a chance to do some research,' Will said, feeling an excitement about his work that he hadn't experienced in a long time. 'I don't want to feel too much like one my students when talking to you, Doctor.' Standing up, he followed Hannibal, out of the room, pausing only to change his slippers for shoes. When he stepped out the door, he stopped and looked at Hannibal, not sure what he was meant to do in this situation. Hannibal seemed to know, as he leant forward and brushed a kiss to Will's cheek. Will's breath hitched, drawing in Hannibal's clean scent.

'Goodnight William,' Hannibal said, slowly drawing himself back and for a moment, just one, Will was tempted to turn Hannibal's head towards him and kiss him properly. Instead, he bid Hannibal goodnight and returned home.

***

The next day Will received a visit from Jack Crawford, from the Behavioural Science division of the FBI. Eight girls had gone missing in the past eight months and the FBI was getting desperate. In the face of such a dire situation, Will could hardly turn Crawford down, not if he could save even one life. He did make all the protests that he thought Jack would listen to, though, before he gave up and followed him to Minnesota to look at the house of Elise Nichols.

Mister and Missus Nichols were the average parents, soulmates and had been together for about twenty years. Elise was probably a miracle baby and it was likely her parents had tried for a number of years to conceive her. Will could also tell that Missus Nichols was an only child and Mister Nichols was the youngest of two, possibly three children. It did not take long for Will to see that Elise had likely been taken from her home, due to her cat, though even he wasn't quite expecting the sight that met him when he opened the door to Elise's room. He was barely able to keep Mister Nichols back when they saw what lay there and secure the room before the ERT arrived and he was able to pass it onto them for a time.

Half-an-hour passed before he was once again required to return to the room. As he walked in, he could feel the way that fear sharpened his senses; his eyes taking in every detail. It was sickening how easily it was for him to slip back into that frame of mind. When the room was clear, his mind began to reconstruct the events until it was as though he was the one who had done it. Still something about this killer was eluding him. It wouldn't be in any of the evidence, but there was some other factor in this that if he could just...

Beverly Katz shattered his illusion and for a long few moments he stood there disorientated, caught between the present and the imagined past. She was asking him a question and he was pretty sure he was meant to answer it, but before he could get a grip on himself, Jack was there, with two others from the forensic team and then they were discussing Elise Nichols and it was forgotten.

Two hours later Will was on a plane back to Virginia, but his mind wouldn't rest. The killer had risked a lot to return Elise to her bed; risked capture in order to satisfy some moral code. Will wasn't yet sure what it was that he couldn't do to Elise, but there must have been something different about her, physically, that they had been unable to see just by looking at her. Whatever it was would probably be revealed at autopsy and till then, there wasn't much Will had to work on, except that damnable feeling.

It had long since turned dark as Will drove from the airport and back towards his home in Wolf Trap. Along the way, he spotted a dog wandering alongside the road. It just had a rope as a collar and lead and its fur was mangled and filthy. It only took a few minutes before he pulled up alongside it and attempted to call it over. He was a skittish thing though, dancing away whenever Will got too close. Not close to giving up yet, Will drove back to a small 7-11 that he had passed a couple of minutes back and returned with a bag of hot dogs.

Even with the hot dogs, it took a while for the dog to warm up enough to stay still for longer than it took to grab the meat from Will's hand, its hunger clearly overriding the threat that Will posed. Within half-an-hour Will was back in his car and heading back home, dog in the back seat. On the way back, Will was thinking about different names that he could name the newest addition to the family, but his mind was tired and so he was feeling less creative than usual.

Then he was home and quickly fetched the clippers, soap, hose, tub, towel and hand dryer and set about cleaning him up. He clearly hadn't been brushed in a long while, so Will first set about trimming the knotty clumps of fur, before giving him a good wash. He knew he didn't have long until the others got curious as came over to investigate, so he quickly dried him off and put him in a kennel to introduce him to the family. A short whistle brought the dogs running and he needed to settle them down first.

'Everybody, this is Winston, Winston, this is everybody.'

That night he dreamed of Elise Nichols floating up from his bed.

***

Will was in the bathroom washing his face, as though hoping it would also wash his mind, when Jack next caught up with him. In retrospect, he should probably have seen it coming.

'What are you doing in here?' Jack said, the moment he entered and if it had been anyone else, they might have jumped, but Will instead felt peeved.

'I enjoy the smell of urinal cake,' Will said, which was probably not the best answer to give in the situation.

'Me, too. Let’s talk,'Jack said, every action exuding aggression which was only serving to give Will a headache. He would probably have to buy a new bottle of aspirin on the way home. Another agent must have followed Jack in to use the facilities, but Jack halted that thought in its tracks quickly. '***USE THE LADIES ROOM***.' The agent quickly jumped to attention and left, which was probably more in line with the reaction Will should have given earlier. Missed opportunities it seemed, and considering the location, it was unlikely that he would have Alana to act as a buffer this time around. Fortunately Jack seemed to reign in his temper a bit as he said, 'Do you respect my judgment, Will?'

'Yes.' Will said, because, well, it wasn't a lie.

'We have a better chance of catching this guy if you’re in the saddle,' Jack said and Will wasn't quite sure what to make of that response.

'I'm in the saddle. Just confused which direction I'm pointing. I don’t know this kind of psychopath. Never read about him. I don’t even know if he’s a psychopath. He’s not

insensitive. He’s not shallow,' Will said, trying to explain as best as he could, without mentioning that feeling he had.

'You could tell something about him or you wouldn’t’ve said this was an apology. What’s he apologising for?' Jack said, as though it meant that Will should suddenly have all the answers. Will sighed and decided to go with what he did know.

'He couldn’t honour her. He feels bad,' Will said, knowing how Jack would take his words even as he said them.

'Feeling bad defeats the purpose of being a psychopath, doesn’t it?' Jack said as though Will didn't know that already as if that wasn't one of the reasons why he was so conflicted about the motives of the killer they were after.

'Yes. It does,' Will said.

'***Then what kind of crazy is he?***' Jack said and Will wished that Jack would stop feeling the need to yell, but apparently that was his go-to reaction when he didn't understand something, so Will tried again to explain.

'He couldn’t show her he loved her so he put her corpse back where he killed it. Whatever crazy that is,'Will said, hoping that it now made as much sense to Jack as it did to him.

'You think he loves these girls?' Jack said, his voice calmer and Will thought about it for a moment.

'He loves one of them, and I think by association, he has some form of love for the others,' Will said, though the love the killer felt was probably more in line with a twisted form of idolisation and morality, than what most would associate with the concept of love, but that would be a lot harder to explain.

'There was no semen or saliva. Elise Nichols died a virgin and she stayed that way,' Jack said and Will knew that Jack couldn't see what he saw at all.

'That’s not how he’s loving them. He wouldn’t disrespect them that way,' Will said, frustrated.'He doesn’t want these girls to suffer. He kills them quickly and, to his thinking, with mercy.'

'The sensitive psychopath. He risked getting caught to tuck Elise Nichols back into bed,' Jack said and Will knew that was probably the best understanding Jack would probably have on the subject.

'He has to take the next girl soon. He knows he’s going to get caught,' Will said. 'One way or the other.'

***

The following day he was back the FBI to hear the evidence that had been collected from Elise Nichols. From the sound of things, though, the answer was: not much. What it did reveal was that the killer was careful about what he left behind, though he wasn't perfect, as the piece of pipe revealed. It also solved the mystery of how he was honouring the girls and why none of the others had been found.

'He's eating them.'

It didn't help that Jack requested that he write up a formal profile for the serial killer they were hunting, in light of the new evidence. This annoyance was mitigated by the fact that since Jack was ready to dismiss the possibility the killer experienced any form of love for his victims, on the basis that there were no bodily fluids at the crime scene, then writing the report was probably for the best.

Despite this, it was always difficult to put into words exactly why a person was behaving the way they did. This one was worse as he knew there was something he was missing, but at least he didn't have Jack breathing down his neck this time as he fumbled around for words and so pulling his laptop closer he set to work.

***

It was about three hours later when he finally came back up for air, though, more for caffeine. The coffee machines at the FBI were truly atrocious, but it was hot and caffeinated, so it served the job. He was just heading back to his office when his phone rang and he had to switch his coffee to his other hand to pull out his phone.

'Hello?'

'Have you got the profile completed yet?' Jack said, his voice lacking the impatience Will had expected.

'Just about,' Will said, fumbling to open his office door and closing it behind him with his foot.

'Good. I want you to bring that and meet me at my office in five minutes,' Jack said and hung up. Will sighed, heading over to the laptop to print out what he had done so far. He had spent the first hour just reading over other profiles and reports of all the evidence they currently didn't have. He would just have to bring his coffee with him, since he would barely have enough time to collect the print out as it was.

Hurrying along, Will made it about thirty seconds late and knocked on the door. Inside, he could hear two voices, Jack's and one other, though it was too quiet to recognise. The next moment the door opened and Jack was standing there.

'Good, you have the report?' Jack said and Will held up the file. 'Come on in.' Jack then stepped aside; allowing Will entrance and Will walked in. Across the other side of the room was the person Jack must have been talking to and the last person Will had expected to see. 'Will, this is Doctor...'

'Hannibal? What are you doing here?' Will said, shocked. Hannibal wasn't quite as well dressed as he was used to seeing him and the hair that was usually slicked back had begun to slip down his forehead, but his smile was the same as Hannibal walked over to greet him.

'Hello Will,' Hannibal said warmly and reached out to take Will's hand, after Will quickly moved to put down the file.

'You two know each other?' Jack said, surprised and Will guessed that Hannibal hadn't mentioned it.

'I had the pleasure of dining with Will on Sunday, as well as Wednesday night,' Hannibal said, returning to his seat.

'Alana was going to go, but she had to cancel at the last minute,' Will said, walking over to the corkboard to look at the map and photos.

'I see,' Jack said and Will could hear the speculation in his voice. The fact that Hannibal had mentioned them dining together twice, in a matter of days, already had Jack questioning their relationship and so Will decided to tell him and get it over with.

'Jack, Hannibal is one of my soulmates,' Will said, turning to face Jack, though not meeting his gaze.

'Excuse me?' Jack said, though, he had clearly heard what Will had said and so neither Will, nor Hannibal said anything. Turning to Hannibal, Jack said, 'don't you think that is the type of information that you should have brought up earlier, Doctor?'

'I believed it was Will's right to tell you and Will's alone, that said, the unofficial nature of your request does provide some possibilities for me to still be of assistance,' Hannibal said and Will frowned at the implications of that statement.

'I'm not sure I can trust you to remain impartial on the matter, Doctor Lecter,' Jack said, but he looked thoughtful.

'No, but you can trust me to look out for Will's best interests,' Hannibal said and Will was unable to stay quiet any longer.

'Excuse me, but what exactly did you want Hannibal to do, Jack?' Will said, trying to prevent the pitch of his voice from going any higher. 'Did you want him to profile the serial killer or me?'

'Look Will, Alana had me promise that I would cover you and this is me keeping that promise,' Jack said in a voice that brooked no argument.

'Jack,' Hannibal said, drawing the attention back to himself, as he looked at the board. 'How many confessions have there been so far?'

'Twelve dozen last time I checked. None of them knew details. Until this morning,' Jack said, going with the sudden change in topic. 'Then everyone knew details. Some genius in Duluth PD took a picture of Elise Nichols' body with their phone and shared it with a few close friends. Freddy Lounds ran it on TattleCrime.'

'Tasteless,' Will said, finishing his coffee. He and Freddy Lounds had never exactly seen eye-to-eye and it was unlikely to change any time soon. Unfortunately, Freddy's arrogance was only matched by her determination and hard work, which only made their job more difficult due to the inability to rule out suspects based on hidden information.

'I would agree,' Hannibal said, before he glanced down at his watch. 'Will, would I be correct in saying that you have a lecture soon?'

'Yes, and I had best be leaving now, unless, do you need me for anything, Jack?' Will said, standing up and throwing his empty cup in the bin.

'Not right now, though keep your phone on you, I will be in touch,' Jack said, waving Will off.

'Once I have talked to Jack, I may have to drop by,' Hannibal said, twisting in his seat to look at Will. 'Since I am here, I could hardly pass up the opportunity.' Will just nodded and left.

***

'Another excellent lecture,' Hannibal said, as he joined Will up at the front of the classroom. He seemed a bit distracted by something, though, Will couldn't see anything out of the ordinary and brushed it off.

'You know, you really don't have to listen to these things,' Will said, putting his things into his bag and pushing up his glasses as they had slipped a bit too low, even for him. 'I'm not even sure if the students are listening to what I say.'

'I cannot believe that would be the case,' Hannibal said and with a slightly different edge to his voice he added. 'I noticed a few that would have been *especially* attentive.

'Really?' Will said with a frown. He would have thought he would notice if any of his students were giving him ***that*** kind of attention. Hannibal seemed rather amused and relieved by this, his hand clamping down on Will's shoulder.

'So, tell me more about that fascinating topic you were talking about today.'

***

This conversation ended up with them sitting across from each other at a nearby cafe, discussing anything and everything on the topic of human bites, both of them rather reluctant to stray too far from the topic as Hannibal said, 'it would give them something to talk about next time'. It was also then that Will finally got around to talking about something that had been weighing on his mind all afternoon.

'Do you remember what we were talking about when I had dinner with you a few days ago?' Will said, not really sure how to broach the topic.

'I believe so, what part exactly?' Hannibal said, his head tilting to the side in that strangely cute manner of his.

'Look, I was driving home after the crime scene, it was late. I probably wasn't really even thinking all that clearly, but then I saw him by the side of the road and I... I couldn't just leave him there,' Will said, wondering if he was trying to justify it to himself as well. 'He was a real mess. Skittish too, wouldn't come near me or the car at first.' Will dragged his hands across his face as he remembered. 'Not that I didn't expect it. A couple of hot dogs changed that.'

'Hot dogs?'

'The best thing I could find at the 7-11,' Will said, looking down into his empty cup. 'So I took him home, introduced him to the others. Then I left him in the kennel overnight so that they could get used to each other.' There was a long pause and Hannibal took a sip from his cup. Will could tell that the coffee was clearly not up to Hannibal's usual standards, though, he hadn't said anything.

'I did not expect you to find yourself another dog quite so soon,' Hannibal said, his tone lightening and he was smiling a little. Will laughed. 'What is his name?'

'Winston. I wasn't feeling very creative,' Will said. 'He's fitting in nicely, though, he is becoming more attached to me than the others have.'

'How so?' Hannibal said and Will could feel Hannibal's eyes on him. The way Hannibal looked at him was going to take some getting used to.

'The other's recognise me as their master, but the bond they have to each other is stronger than the one they have formed with me,' Will said, looking up at Hannibal's pale eyebrows. 'Winston isn't following that behaviour.'

'It has only been two nights. That might change,' Hannibal said, though, Will wasn't sure to what end. Instead, he just nodded.

'It might,' Will said, but he wasn't convinced. He had enough experience with bringing in strays to notice behaviour patterns quite quickly.

'Does this behaviour worry you?' Hannibal said and Will paused to think for a moment.

'It doesn't worry me at the moment, but I guess I will just have to wait and see,' Will said and took a quick glance at his watch. 'Speaking of which, I should probably be going now.'

'Yes, I too should be heading back,' Hannibal said, picking up his coat, which lay beside him on the table and folding it across his arm. The waitress came over soon after and they paid their bill. 'Will, I hope you will allow me the opportunity to meet your dogs soon.'

'You want to meet my dogs?' Will said, incredulous, though a slight smile fought its way onto his face.

'Of course. They are the family you have built for yourself and as I wish to be a part of your family. It would be remiss of me not to,' Hannibal said, sounding so genuine that Will had to laugh.

'Okay, okay,' Will said, stepping out of the cafe and onto the sidewalk.

'Then, for now, this is where we must part ways,' Hannibal said and Will felt the sudden urge to speak, to drag it out a bit longer.

'Hannibal, I just want you to know, I have really enjoyed talking with you. It isn't very often that someone gives me a chance to speak my mind, let alone encourages it,' Will said, his eyes locked straight ahead and unable to meet Hannibal's own.

'That is fortunate, as I too have enjoyed our conversations and look forward to many more of them,' Hannibal said and Will could tell that he meant it and felt warm, despite the cool air around them.

Two days later Will got a phone call from Jack about the death of Missus Nichols and everything began to fall into place.

***

It wouldn't take a genius to work out that it wasn't the work of the original killer, as, even if the victim had of fit the profile of the others, the humiliation of the victim would have made that clear enough. What was less clear was how this murder was related to the other victims, other than through her relationship to the victim and the mounting of her body on antlers. There was no love in this killer at all and it made Will queasy just looking at it.

'I feel like I'm dreaming,' Will said to Jack and with the dreams he had been having, it wouldn't be much of surprise if he were.

'The head was reported stolen last night about a mile from here,' Jack said and Will mentally contrasted it with the other killer.

'Just the head?' Will said, trying to puzzle all the pieces together.

'Minneapolis homicide has already made a statement. They're calling him "*the plagiarist*",' Jack said and nodded at Will's disgusted expression. 'I knew you wouldn't like it.'

'Well, whoever it was is going to like that either,' Will said as he looked over at the crime scene. Part of him also wondered if Mister Nichols wouldn't soon decide to join his wife and daughter and wondered if he should mention that possibility to anyone. 'The person who constructed this wanted to elevate his work above what the other killer has done. He is mocking her, he's mocking the killer and he's mocking us.'

'For what purpose? What does he gain by doing this?' Jack said and Will walked around the body, examining from all angles.

'An intelligent psychopath, particularly a sadist, is hard to catch. There's no traceable motive. There'll be no patterns. He may never kill like this again,' Will said quickly. Sometimes it was easier to explain if he just thought out loud. 'But that doesn't mean we can't use this death to catch the other killer. In fact, I think he wants us to.'

'What do you mean?' Jack said, and Will frowned, not even really sure himself what he was onto.

'It's like he wanted to give us a negative so we could see the positive,' Will said, pieces coming together in his mind as facts fell together like dominoes. 'He owns a house, or a cabin, somewhere with an antler room. He has a daughter, same age, same weight, same hair colour, eye colour as the other victims. She's an only child, but she's leaving home. He's terrified of losing her. She's his golden ticket...' He stopped, that nagging sensation growing stronger. 'But why did he choose you?' Will finished with a murmur and like that, the final piece clicked into place. 'He's married, but the woman he married isn't his soulmate and he resents her for it. He loves her, but he only married her because of his daughter. Then he looks at his daughter and as much as he loves her, it would make things so much easier if she would just go back to being a small part of him. There wouldn't be the constant pressure for things to remain as they are.'

'That should narrow down out search quite a bit,' Jack said, his eyes narrowing. 'How long have you been working on the theory about the wife?'

"To be honest, I didn't even know what I was thinking until now, there was just something that I wasn't seeing,' Will said, 'is there anything else?'

'No, good job,' Jack said, 'I'll let you know when it's time to go through records.'

***

It took a long while for Will to go to sleep that night. So long in fact, that as he stood there, looking at the stag coated in raven feathers, he almost wondered if he hadn't just wandered

outside, despite his current location being a motel in Minnesota and not back at home in Virginia.

A knock on the door ended those thoughts and tried to rouse himself enough to answer the door. Glancing at the sweaty fabric of his shirt, he made a last minute decision to grab a robe, before opening the door, to glaring light of day and the smiling face of Hannibal Lecter.

'Good morning Will. May I come in?' Hannibal said, raising his hands, which held a couple of mugs, a thermos and a small thermal food storage bag, as though in offering.

'Where's Crawford?' Will said, feeling as though he left his wits on his pillow.

'Deposed in court. The adventure will be yours and mine today,' Hannibal said, before repeating, 'may I come in?'

Feeling a bit like an idiot for having just stood there, Will shuffled aside to allow Hannibal entrance. Will was almost grateful for the brief darkness that followed after he closed the door, as Hannibal had pressed a quick kiss to his cheek and Will was sure his face was rather red. Will then went over to the window to push aside the curtains, allowing a small amount of light into the room.

'Do you want me to get you a plate or something, Hannibal?' Will said, deciding to get one for himself while he was up.

'Thank you, but no,' Hannibal said, placing the containers out on the table and pouring them each a mug of coffee. Even from where Will was standing the scent was rich and welcome and he looked forward to tasting it to see if it would be half as good as it promised to be. 'I hope you don't mind, I am very careful about what I put into my body. Which means I end up preparing most meals myself. A little protein scramble to start the day. Some eggs, some sausage.'

'No, it's fine. I was just planning to pick something up to go,' Will said as he said down, emptying the bowl onto the plate. He could feel Hannibal's eyes on him as he took he first bite. 'It's delicious, thank you.'

'My pleasure,' Hannibal said, and Will noticed he seemed amused about something, but without caffeine in his body, he didn't trust any analysis of that and proceeded to take a long sip of his coffee. If it wasn't an impossibility, Will would have thought it tasted better than it smelled.

'Jack was telling me that you have found yourself a copy-cat,' Hannibal said and Will groaned, burying his face in his hands. 'What is it Will?'

'Just thinking about the name they gave him,' Will said, which wasn't exactly a lie, but he was more thinking about the reasoning behind the murder itself. It wasn't personal, it was instructional. The killer wanted everyone to see how smart they were.

'I see, though, I can't see how this one is any more or less distasteful than any of the others that they have chosen throughout the years.

'True, but whoever it was, they want us to use their murder to find the other killer,' Will said, hoping that at least Hannibal would be able to understand.

'The devil is in the details. What did your Copy Cat do to the woman in the field? What gave it away?' Hannibal said, pausing eating to look at Will.

'Everything. It’s like he had to show me a negative so I could see the positive. That crime scene was practically gift-wrapped,' Will said, rubbing his face. 'Whoever it is, they aren't a cop, and they have no stake in this other than the one they have created.'

'What did the killer do to make you so certain?' Hannibal said and Will moved back in his chair, his arms coming across his chest as he looked at Hannibal, trying to determine how to phrase it.

'It's- this wasn't justice, this wasn't vengeance. This was humiliation, but it was goal orientated,' Will said and he wondered if he should mention the other thing about the crime scene that had him bothered. 'Th-there's something else. When I went to the Nichols house, there was something off that I noticed there. I'm not sure what it was, but whatever it was, but this killer, they noticed it.'

'Are you sure he notice it or was it just a coincidence?' Hannibal said, punctuating his sentence with another bite of food.

'If he didn't notice, he would have just used a girl that fit the same pattern as the others, but he didn't, he killed the mother, which shows that he does, somewhat, understand the reasoning behind the killers actions, Will said his eyes now looking beyond what the eye could see, once again at the crime scene. 'The father hates his daughter, because he resents his wife. The killer knew that, or had some idea.'

'The mathematics of human behaviour. All those ugly variables. Some bad math with this plagiarist fellow. Are you reconstructing his fantasies? What kind of problems does he have?' Hannibal said and it took Will a moment to adjust to the subject change.

'He has a few.' Will said, unwilling to admit just how difficult it was for him to get a read on that particular killer.

'Ever have any problems, Will?' Hannibal said, his tone teasing and Will tried to resist a smile.

'Me? No,' Will said, playing the idea off as ludicrous and took another sip of coffee.

'Of course you don't. You and I are just alike. Problem free. Nothing about us to feel horrible about,' Hannibal said 'I think Jack sees you as a fragile little tea-cup, the finest china used only for special guests.' Now that was a ridiculous notion, Will thought, as a laugh forced its way past his lips, which prompted a short chuckle from Hannibal

'How do you see me?' Will said, curious for the perspective of the one who was supposedly his soul's mate.

'The mongoose I want under my house when the snakes slither by,' Hannibal said, his eyes strangely intense. 'Finish your breakfast.'

***

The car ride over to the construction site was rather pleasant with Hannibal as company and Will found Hannibal's strange excitement and curiosity a needed boost to what promised to be a very dull day. This was proven when the secretary, Dixie, forced them to jump through a number of hoops and each sign confidentiality agreements before she would let them anywhere near the file cabinets. Then it was a couple of hours of searching while Dixie hovered in the background and made a few rather cranky phone calls.

'Garrett Jacob Hobbs,' Will said, when he hit another abnormality, though this one looked more promising than the others.

'One of our pipe-threaders. Those are all the resignation letters. Plumber's union requires them whenever members finish a job,' Dixie said, before finishing up her phone call.

'Did mister Hobbs have a daughter?' Will said, rechecking the days Hobbs was absent with a mental timeline of the crimes committed.

'Might have,' Dixie said, being deliberately unhelpful, though it was probably also a matter of not wanting to look like she associated with the help.

'Eighteen or nineteen, wind-chaffed? Plain but pretty? She would have auburn hair. About this tall,' Will said, figuring it wouldn't hurt to ask and gestured an approximate height.

'Maybe. I don't know. I don't keep company with these people,' Dixie said and Will guessed that it was probably the closest they were going to get to an actual answer.

'What is it about Garrett Jacob Hobbs you find so peculiar?' Hannibal said, looking up from the file he had been perusing.

'He left a phone number and no address,' Will said, 'Everyone else left an address. He also missed days of work at a time and I think some of these coincide with some of the disappearances. I would have to check to make sure. Dixie, do you have an address for mister Hobbs?'

Half an hour later, Will was sure they had all they needed and he, Dixie and Hannibal carried some boxes out to the car. At the top of the steps, however, Hannibal demonstrated a rather uncharacteristic display of clumsiness, which caused a number of the papers to fall to the ground around them.

'I got it,' Will said and started to pick them up. To his surprise, Dixie quickly joined him to help and he murmured a quick thank you. He knew the sheets would be completely out of order, but there was nothing to be done about that now, as he would hardly know what order

to put them into anyway. When they were done, Will turned to Dixie, who was standing around awkwardly. 'I hope you don't mind me asking, but you just had with your soulmate didn't you?'

'How did you...?' Dixie said, more than a little shocked and Will was a bit too. He didn't usually ask people about their home life unless they mentioned it.

'A guess?' Will said, to save the trouble of explaining and though she seemed a little sceptical, Dixie nodded.

'Yeah. He got a job overseas and is really excited about it and I'm excited for him too,' Dixie said, her eyes already tearing up a little. 'But mum's real sick and this job...'

'Have you told him how you feel,' Hannibal said, making his way down the steps.

'Yeah, I have, but this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for him and he doesn't understand why I can't leap just because he told me to,' Dixie said and wiped her eyes, being careful to keep her nails away. 'But you can't stand around here all listening to me and I have work to be getting on with.' With a final thanks, and a promise to return the files as soon as they were able to, Will and Hannibal got back into the car, which had warmed in their absence.

'I hope you don't mind,' Will said to Hannibal and pulled out his phone.

'Not at all,' Hannibal said pulling on his seatbelt as Will dialled Jack's number.

'Will, tell me you have good news.'

'I think we have a suspect. His name is Garrett Jacob Hobbs and he was a pipe threader at the construction site we just visited. He has also taken time off and I think some of the days correspond with some of the time frames for when girls have gone missing.'

'Best news I've heard all day,' Jack said and from his tone, Will believed him completely.

'If you want, I can drop by and interview him, since I'm in the area,' Will said, glanced at Hannibal to check if it was okay.

'Do that, but give me the address, so I can send backup just in case,' Jack said and Will rattled off the address and ended the call.

'So, I guess you will get to see a door-to-door interview after all,' Will said, giving a small chuckle as he checked his map for the address and started up his car. 'So, is this still as exciting as you thought it would be?'

'I must admit that wore off after the first half hour,' Hannibal said, with such genuine disappointment that Will had to check to see if he was joking or not, though even then he couldn't really tell.

'Well, I did warn you,' Will said, shooting Hannibal a small smile.

'That you did and the world of fiction is poorer for its loss,' Hannibal said, causing Will to chuckle.

'Maybe that's why I don't watch crime shows. I would get jealous watching all the fun they're having, Will said, before pausing for a moment. 'No, it's because even the best actors are only acting and the more they stray away from their true identities... It's disorientating.'

'How is reading for you?' Hannibal said and Will could feel the spark of curiosity that he had awoken inside Hannibal like it was his own.

'I like to read just fine,' Will said, though his latest novel was one he had started three months before and it had probably made its way under his bed for all he knew. 'Reading is different. You're not looking at people when you read and I have to actually put some effort into connecting with writing. The thing I do; it works better with visuals is all.'

'I suspected as much,' Hannibal said and for a moment Will wondered if it was because Hannibal was his soulmate that he was so easy to talk to, or if it was just one of Hannibal's talents. 'I also do not find much use for a television in my home. Too often I find the storylines boring and predictable and any other information can usually be sourced elsewhere.'

'So, listen, when we get there the plan is...'

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Whatever semblance of a plan Will had gone to hell the moment they arrived. It all went so fast, yet when it was happening it felt like it was in slow motion. Like he couldn't move fast enough. Like he wouldn't be able to get there in time save her... and he *wasn't*. If Hannibal hadn't been there...

Will looked up, ignoring the paramedic who was trying to get his attention and searched for Hannibal's familiar face.

'Where is he?' Getting up on shaky legs, Will kept looking around, only taking a few stumbling steps before the paramedic grabbed his shoulders and eased him back onto ledge he had been resting against before. He wasn't sure how long he stayed there, but eventually, after he had checked in with Jack to give him a brief report, he was finally given the all clear to head over to the hospital to check on Abigail's progress.

Fortunately, Will didn't need to do much more than show his badge, which was really just about all he could manage at that point, before the receptionist informed Will of Abigail's room number and brief instructions on how to get there. The instructions didn't prove very helpful; however, when Will forgot them half-a-dozen times, but eventually he made it. Walking into the room, Will was only mildly surprised to see Hannibal was still at the hospital, though that was more to do with the fact Hannibal was holding Abigail's hand and

appeared to be asleep. The empty chair did seem an awful deal more inviting than the ones Will had expected to see and he collapsed into it gratefully.

'Will?'

Turning his head to look at Hannibal, whose eyes were now open, though not completely and whose posture hadn't shifted from the slouch that sleep had given it, Will gave him a small smile.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you,' Will said quietly, mindful of the sleeping teenager in the room, though he knew it was unlikely Abigail would have been disturbed even if he were yelling.

'I'm grateful you did,' Hannibal said, a smile in his voice and in his eyes, though not on his lips. 'I was concerned for you. You were not very responsive when I left.'

'Abigail needed you more, I get it. It's okay,' Will said, even if he couldn't help wishing that Hannibal had stayed with him after what had happened. 'How is she doing?'

'All things considered, she is doing rather well,' Hannibal said, finally shifting in his chair to sit upright. 'She lost a great deal of blood, as you can imagine and she needed a blood transfusion, but the operation was a smooth and successful one, so she should make a full recovery.'

'That's good to hear,' Will said, raising his hands to rub at his eyes. He wasn't sure how well he was expecting to sleep that night, though it might help that he was absolutely exhausted.

'I hope you don't find this too presumptuous of me, but it would be a great comfort to me if you would consider spending the night where I am staying,' Hannibal said and Will felt his eyebrows raise in surprise. 'You are exhausted and in no state to be driving at the moment. This way I will know you are safe and fed.'

'Would you mind if we dropped by the motel I am staying at so I can grab a few things?' Will said, not wanting to admit that he would rather not be alone right then either.

‘Certainly.’

Needing a distraction, Will looked down at the almost motionless body of Abigail Hobbs, who looked so lifeless in comparison to the girl he had first seen, though watching someone get their throat slit by their father was hardly a good introduction. Seeing her now, you would have almost thought her father had succeeded, as her face, which had been so full of fear was now deathly peaceful. 'Hannibal, can we stay a little bit longer?'

'Of course.'

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It was late by the time they left, though Hannibal made no comment and Will was struggling to stay awake. As promised, however, Hannibal made a stop at Will's motel room so that Will could grab what he needed, though he would have to come by the next day for the rest.

'I have heard that Abigail will be transferred to D.C once she is stable enough to be moved,' Hannibal said and Will murmured in acknowledgement. In his mind's eye he was far away in the Hobbs' house, revisiting Garrett Jacob Hobbs' final moments and words, as though on repeat which then blurred together with his own insight and imagination.

'Hannibal,' Will said after a long moment, only for Hannibal to echo Will's earlier response. 'Have you ever thought about being a parent?'

'While I believe it would be an honour and a privilege to be given the power to help shape the path for another human to take, I have never believed it would be one I would take part in,' Hannibal said. 'Do you desire children, Will?'

'It's not that...' Will said, and it was true. Children always just seemed to be a part of someone else's life, but still... 'I have a few parent marks.'

'I see,' Hannibal said, his tone off like Will had expected it would be after hearing such news. 'Are you still in contact with the mother?'

'No, it's not like that,' Will said. 'To be honest, I have no idea who any of them are.' Will paused then, trying to find the right words to phrase what he wanted to say. 'Back when I was starting off in the police, I was out one night celebrating with some people when I got dared to go donate to a sperm bank. We were all just joking around and I don't think anyone actually expected me to go through with it. I didn't decide to do it straight away. It's a big decision, but then a few weeks later I decided to do it. Still, by the time I actually received the first mark I had mostly forgotten about it.'

'Do you think of them often, your children?' Hannibal said, pulling into a numbered car park at a rather fancy looking hotel.

'They're not my children. Biologically, yeah, but I'm not going to know them, so I don't deserve to have any rights to them or over them. It's not my place,' Will said, trying not to let his mind go onto the trail of 'what ifs'. 'I didn't do it so I could have children; I did it so that maybe others could have that life.'

'Do you ever regret it?' Hannibal said, turning off the car and plunging it into darkness.

'Do I regret helping other people to have the children that they might have desperately wanted? No,' Will said and opened the door to climb out.

'How many?' Hannibal said, locking the car doors and leading Will inside the hotel.

'Three,' Will said. 'One on my back, one on the behind my left ear and the third is on my right thigh. I thought it was probably best that I tell you about them before you find out by yourself.'

'And I am grateful for your honesty,' Hannibal said, 'It does, however make me curious as to what you expected my reaction would be to finding out this news.'

'Well, that's the thing about you, Hannibal, I can't really predict you. I don't want to,' Will said, not really knowing the answer either. 'I am glad it doesn't appear to be a negative reaction in any case.'

'Why should it be? I do not own you and you have lived and continue to live a life outside of our time together. What you do with that time is entirely within your power,' Hannibal said, sounding so reasonable, it was almost unbelievable.

'Uh, thanks, I guess,' Will said awkwardly and waited for Hannibal to unlock the door to the room he was staying in.

'I would very much like to see them at some point, but not before you feel comfortable with showing them to me,' Hannibal said and Will nodded, taking in the rooms interior. Yep, completely out of his price range. 'Now, if you would like, you may use the bathroom to have a shower and I will make dinner and prepare your bed. I believe the couch in the lounge contains a fold out bed and I found spare sheets in the cupboard.'

'I can handle that,' Will said, not wanting Hannibal to have to so much trouble on his behalf.

'I'm sure you can, but I am also aware that you have had a very stressful day and so I would like to do these things for you,' Hannibal said and Will found it within himself to give Hannibal another smile.

'Thank you, Hannibal.'

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The morning after Will spent the night with Hannibal mere metres away, was weird. Will had expected that, but the reality of it was never fun. It was just one more aspect of the reality of having a soulmate that he would have to get used to. Not that it was an entirely unpleasant reality. The fact that Hannibal seemed to make breakfast just as well as he made dinner was, by itself, almost enough for Will to want to repeat the experience, and often. The view certainly helped, though he hadn't expected he would have the opportunity to see Hannibal in his sleepwear for... a while, at least. He seemed older like this, but more touchable and Will could touch him, he knew that. It was just going to take a while for his instincts to stop telling him not to.

What hadn’t helped was that he had nightmares for, what seemed like, the entire night. He only hoped that he hadn't disturbed Hannibal, though, from the lack of comment, he assumed he hadn't. He did feel guilty about the sweat-stained sheets, but there wasn't much he could really do about that.

Before he knew it, Will was back on a plane again to head back home. He had missed his dogs, certainly, but he could feel the weight of the trip dragging behind him, like the corpse of Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Abigail's terrified eyes haunted his every quiet moment. He had saved her life and he should be glad about that. He was glad about that, but he had to wonder if it wouldn't be easier to deal with if he didn't have the ghost of his own mother hanging around in the back of his brain.

He hadn't expected that it would be her, not Garrett Jacob Hobbs and Abigail, that he dreamed about the night before, but then, he never was very good at predicting his dreams or his nightmares. Hannibal hadn't asked him any questions about it, though and he was grateful for the space. In fact, the only time he had come close to the topic of what had occurred the day before, was to suggest he take a few days off work to spend with his dogs.

Will had protested originally, but later, surrounded by their infectious happiness and devotion. It actually sounded like exactly what he needed right then. It was for this reason that he tried not to feel too guilty when he made the phone calls to have a few more days off. Dealing with Alana, though, hadn't been easy...

'Will, are you okay? Jack told me what happened.'

'Yeah, I'm fine. Are you sure you're okay to take my classes for a few more days?'

'Of course. Take all the time you need,' Alana said, before her tone turned vengeful. 'Jack promised me, he ***promised*** *me that he wouldn't let you get to close to this.'*

'I don't think Jack had too much control over what happened, Alana,' Will said, trying not to get annoyed at her desire to protect him all the time. Like he wasn't used to dealing with people like Jack. 'Besides, we got a report saying that Hobbs received a phone call before we arrived. We think someone tipped him off, though we haven't been able to trace the call.'

'Don't try and make me think about this rationally, Will, I want to be angry about this. I have a right to be angry about this,' Alana said and he could almost hear the pout in her tone, even if she would never admit it.

'Fine, go, defend my honour... or my sanity,' Will said with a laugh, giving Winston a pat as he brushed up against Will's legs.

It was good. Talking with Alana, it was easy and he found himself promising to bring her some fish jerky if he caught anything when he went fishing the next day. The hard part came when he was unpacking his clothes and he found a small, perfectly wrapped present mixed in with his clothes. He didn't even need to open the envelope attached to know who it was from, the perfect calligraphy was enough of a give-away. The paper for the envelope was relatively stiff and probably rather expensive and gave off a faint sheen under the fluorescent lighting.

It was for these reasons, plus a minor lapse in sanity that Will found himself going to going to the kitchen to get a knife, in lieu of a proper letter opener. Hannibal probably had a letter opener, Will thought and amused himself for a moment by imagining what it would look like, before he finally sliced the envelope open and pulled out the note inside. It was made out of the same heavy paper as the envelope, which probably meant it was bought in a set. The note

itself was brief and to the point, which Will enjoyed, as he was sick of overly elaborate language from having to use it so often as part of his job. It was simply an invitation to join Hannibal for dinner again and to confirm the date and time would suit so that Hannibal could make a reservation. Hannibal also added that he hoped that Will enjoyed the gift and Hannibal expected nothing in return.

Placing the note aside, Will gently pulled the ribbon free and unwrapped the paper carefully so that he could reuse it at some point. Inside was small box of aftershave and Will opened the box to smell it, amazed. It was a nice scent, light and nothing at all like anything Hannibal would wear. Hannibal had been thinking about him. At some level Will had known that was the case, but this was solid, irrefutable proof of that. Hannibal had thought of him and wanted to give Will something as a reminder so that he would think of Hannibal as well.

Will felt his heart sink.

Hannibal was making a solid effort to give him the space he needed and not force him into anything just because they happened to have the same mark on their skin and here he was off thinking about Alana. Thinking about her laugh and her smile. Never mind the fact that Hannibal listened to him, and even seemed to like and respect him a little. He probably would have continued his little self-beration session, but the phone ringing ended all that.

'Hello William.'

'Hello Hannibal,' Will said and glanced at the time, only to be surprised at how much time had passed. 'Sorry I didn't call, I had to make a few calls and then take out the dogs, since they have been cooped up so much. Also, Wanda really needed a wash and then all of them needed one and I seemed to go straight on to unpacking.'

'I thought as such, however I grew impatient and decided to save you the trouble of making the phone call,' Hannibal said and Will didn't really know what to make of that; unused to having people so evidently enjoy his company.

'I found your gift, thank you,' Will said, though he couldn't help but add, 'you know, you didn't have to do that.'

'And you are also aware I did not have to do it, so by that logic I must have done it because I wanted to,' Hannibal said, before his tone turned a little sly and he added, *'however, if you want to make it up to me, you could accompany me on a date.'*

'You mean the one that was mentioned in the note?' Will said, trying not to laugh.

'I do believe that would be the one,' Hannibal said.

'So you're reward is that I go on the date with you that I was already planning on agreeing to?' Will said, collapsing on the couch, his dog pack joining him moments after.

'Well then, it seems you owe me nothing,' Hannibal said, sounding pleased. Meanwhile Will had to shove Watson away, who had been attempting to crawl onto Will's lap, even though he was still a bit damp from his earlier wash.

'How magnanimous of you,' Will said dryly and they spent the rest of the conversation discussing the finer details of their date, including, but not limited to Will packing an overnight bag so that he didn't have to worry about driving home late at night and an agreement that Will would wear the aftershave that Hannibal had picked out. None of this seemed like it would be too hard, but he would be finding out soon enough he supposed. It wasn't like he had been on a dinner date at an actual restaurant or even been to a restaurant in general in a number of years. What was he even supposed to wear? He had never really enjoyed clothes shopping, but it seemed like it would be a necessity now.

Standing, he headed over to the radio to turn it on, preferring the, mostly crap, music to silence on days like these. Still, he had about one and a bit days before he would have to talk to Jack again, some wonderful dogs who would never turn down some extra attention and a three-quarter full bottle of whiskey; his evening pretty much set.

'So, what to have for dinner?'

End Notes

Sorry that this took so long for me to write and post. I have actually been working on this on and off for about 8 months. The up side is that this was over twice the length of the first story and the sequel to this, when I get to writing it, should be longer again. I am at uni, though, so don't expect it out too quickly. I am curious as to what everyone thinks of this though and I will try and take comments on board for the sequel. For example, should I include Hannibal's perspective in the next one or just stick to Will? Do you want Will to meet any of his 'kids' and if so, how many and should they be original character or from Hannibal. If they are from Hannibal they could anyone from Marissa Shurr, to Cassie Boyle (because she didn't die), to Clarice or even Abigail. So let me know. As for the secret Will is keeping about his mum, it will be revealed in the sequel.

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